Inaugural Address

ASIS in an Age of Complexity

by Debora Shaw

Editor’s Note: At the 1996 ASIS Annual Meeting, held in Baltimore in October, Debora Shaw succeeded to the ASIS presidency. She delivered the following remarks to the gathered membership.

Having attended many ASIS presidential inaugural addresses and listened to several, I have often wondered where these presidents have come up with the ideas they present. I am indeed fortunate to be making my address in a year when there are obvious issues worthy of ASIS attention, on both societal and professional levels.

First, my sincere thanks to the current ASIS Board of Directors for starting us on the path toward considering our role and future as a society. Thanks, too, to predecessor boards (and councils, in case anyone else remembers those days) for providing the support on which we build.

I would like to consider ASIS, its future and our connections with that future from two perspectives: first, ASIS as an organization, and then, ASIS members as information professionals.

ASIS claims to be a society, so it seems fair to do some armchair sociology. A fundamental sociological observation is that people affiliate with people like themselves. But in ASIS we choose to come together because of our differences. When I talk with students about the advantages of ASIS membership, I emphasize the diversity of academic backgrounds, research and applications perspectives, and pervasive friendliness of ASIS meetings. A predecessor colleague whose name I can’t recall at the moment encourages ASIS to define itself by emphasizing the logical OR of its members’ interests.

A wise man once said that professional societies are supported financially on three legs—publications, meetings and member support through dues. Right now there are forces beyond our control tending with each of those stool legs; it remains to be seen whether the tinkering is body building or termites.

First, publications: Although they try not to talk about it in polite company, your Board of Directors has spent many long hours thinking about copyright issues. You will not be surprised that the Board has not come up with the ultimate answer to all copyright questions. Electronic versions of current publications, possible new
e-publications and questions of what is a publication have been discussed. *JASIS, ARIST*, our monographs and proceedings are valuable resources we and the ASIS members before us have contributed to society. Where are or should they be headed?

Second, meetings: At last we have potential technological "fixes" to circumvent the costs and inconvenience of travel. Virtual meetings could presumably offer at least some of the benefits of our national conferences. At the same time, regional gatherings and meetings with "sibling" societies may provide ways of sharing the benefits of ASIS with colleagues who would otherwise not take part. What might such changes portend for ASIS as we have come to know it?

Third, member support: How should we respond to inflationary pressures on dues structures? Which are the sibling societies with which we compare ASIS? Should we make such comparisons, or is ASIS unique? How much can some members subsidize the opportunities of others? Should we attempt to grow ASIS? And if so, how would we feel if it became a radically different organization?

The issues and questions above are presented from the Society's perspective. Each of us has professional and personal opinions, expectations and axes to grind. We come to these questions as researchers, information providers, teachers, information users and information re-users. These roles can be in conflict with each other, and our individual perspectives may differ from the member-of-ASIS perspective.

It is no accident that the theme for the 1996 Annual Meeting is *Global Complexity: Information, Chaos and Control.* The fundamental description of chaotic systems is the impossibility of knowing enough at any point to predict a future state of the system. When it comes to securing the future of our society, we are reacting to and trying to anticipate actions of a complex and rapidly evolving environment. We will encourage electronic publications, flexible copyright policies and explore regional and cooperative meetings, but we will not always make the right decisions/guesses.

This is the complex, even chaotic, world in which we work and live: the addition of the ASIS perspective adds yet another window (or prism) on the complexity. We should expect differences of opinion about specific actions, even courses of action, but we should also expect engagement of ASIS members to shape the chaos to our ends.